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COMMUNION WITH GOD IN THE BIBLE

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I. IN THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS

Whatever else the Bible is, it is at any rate a record of religious experience. The men from whom it came had found God, and it is in his light that they see light. For them there is no interpretation of the world, of history, or of life, apart from him. It is he in whom all things and all men live and move and are; and, however interesting the things and the men may be in themselves, it is not with this interest that the Bible is primarily concerned, but with the interest that gathers about them or inheres in them, through their relations to God. Thus, in the Bible, history is not written for its own sake, it is regarded as an exhibition of the divine purpose that runs throughout the ages toward some magnificent consummation; prophecy is the passionate presentation of the divine character and demands before the sluggish and besotted consciences of men: everywhere upon the life of man falls the light of God.

All this means that while the Bible is a revelation of God, it is no less a revelation of man. Its words let us look into the life and nature of God; they bring us, as no other human words so powerfully and completely bring us, into the presence of that great eternal Person, with whom every living soul has to do. But they do more. They let us look into the inner life and experience of the writers themselves. Their words are their testimony, often all unconscious, to the quality of their inward spirit. This, of course, is obvious in the case of the Psalms: there men are pouring out their hearts before God and, in the process, the revelation of themselves is inevitable. But this revelation is no less genuine, even where it is less obvious. The biblical historians, when they are recording and interpreting fact, are no less surely exhibiting their own faith. They are telling us what *they* see in the history, and thus incidentally disclosing their own religious capacity, experience, and outlook. Similarly, the prophets who present so earnestly the claims of God upon society and the

individual, have first apprehended God for themselves, or rather been apprehended of him: it is in the constraint of a divine possession that they come before their audiences to deliver their sublime appeal. It is out of the depths of an intimate religious experience that they say what they say and plead as they plead. The words of the Bible are a window into the souls of the men who penned them.

A systematic study of the Bible from this point of view would be extremely valuable. Read as a record of religious experience, it would bring us face to face with the men of the ancient Hebrew world in their deepest and devoutest moods, and our religious life would be stimulated and deepened by the sight of theirs. Prophets and historians, anonymous though many of them be, would stand before us as living men, whose life was rooted in communion with God. This aspect of Biblical study has perhaps not been as prominent as it might have been. We have had histories of Hebrew religion, volumes on Old and New Testament theology, studies of particular aspects of Hebrew thought, belief, worship, and practice; but, while it is of great scientific importance to trace the history of an idea through the centuries, and to watch it growing in purity and power, it is of no less religious importance to see the operation of that idea within some human soul. The real and vital power of the idea is only truly seen in its impact upon personality; and such a study as this, if executed sympathetically and scientifically, should bring us into the very innermost heart of Hebrew religion. Religion is more than an idea, or group of ideas: it is an experience—the experience of God. And an acquaintance with the men who had this experience—especially with men who, like the biblical writers, were peculiarly sensitive and responsive to divine influences—would seem to be more *religiously* fruitful than a historical or theological study—important as this is—which simply traces ideas and examines their correlations. In this study and the following four, a tentative effort will be made in the direction indicated. We shall try to ascertain, so far as we may, some of the ultimate facts in the religious experience that lies behind the Bible, and to see something of the nature and effects of communion with God, as shared by the men whose words are there enshrined forever.

A beginning may appropriately be made with the prophets of the Old Testament. Doubtless there was real communion of a thoroughly spiritual kind—i. e., unmediated by ephod, urim, or other such sacerdotal paraphernalia—even in pre-prophetic times, whose religious level was probably higher than some recent criticism has been willing to allow. We select the prophets as the first of our studies, simply because they are the most profound and conspicuous exponents and representatives of Israel's religion, and the phenomena of religious experience might naturally be expected to receive unique expression in them. The heart of the Old Testament is undoubtedly its prophecy; indeed the Hebrew prophets occupy a place of lonely pre-eminence in the religious history of the world.

Ample, however, as is the prophetic material, it is difficult for us to reach through it the sort of experience of which we are in search. It is, in the nature of the case, rather the outer than the inner aspects of their activities that come before us in their writings. Most of them were public men, and their writings are mostly public addresses, or, at any rate, fragments or summaries of such addresses. From the power of their public utterances, we are entitled to infer that they were men of great religious capacity; only men who knew God well, men to whom religion was the supreme reality, could have pled for Him as they did. But into their inner experience we are seldom permitted to look. The glimpse that we get of the prophet is as he stands before a popular audience, gathered, it may be, for some festival at a shrine, Bethel, or Samaria, or the temple of Jerusalem; and it is but seldom that we detect him in the act of direct communion with his God. His situation is analogous to that of the modern preacher. In the sermon we may feel sure that we are listening to the words of a true man of God, but the source of his power lies in a communion of which, the more spiritually sensitive the preacher is, the less will he be likely to say in public. It is in the inner chamber, when the door is shut, that the secrets of the heart are laid bare, and power for work is won. Our knowledge, therefore, of the prophets on their inner side has to be gained largely by inference.

The prophets must have been men of extreme spiritual sensitiveness and receptivity; the whole drift and atmosphere of their speech is proof enough of that. But it is also very probable that this sensi-

tiveness was encouraged by a certain physical and temperamental predisposition. Scattered hints, and occasionally fuller statements, seem to suggest that they were visited at times by religious experiences which were not indeed unique—least of all in the oriental world—but certainly peculiar. Visions and voices are not unknown to them, and in these things we might be tempted to see some unique manifestation of God to their souls. The connection, however, of the literary prophets with their ecstatic predecessors must not be forgotten, and it goes far to explain these particular features of prophetic experience. True, Amos (7:14) disclaims all connection with the popular prophetic guilds; and, generally speaking, the methods, no less than the message of the literary prophets, differed very seriously from those in vogue in earlier times. But it is no less true that the pathological features which were so prominent among the so-called “prophets” of the time of Samuel and Saul continued more or less to mark the development of prophecy; they are sporadically present even in the writings of the prophets proper, and can be traced from Amos to Ezekiel, if not also Zechariah. It is not indeed an inevitable, but it is a very frequent, element in the prophetic temperament. Paul himself saw visions, heard voices, and could speak with tongues (I Cor. 14:18). In the tenth century B.C., and when patriotic enthusiasm was kindled by the hope of resisting Philistine oppression, roving bands of ecstatic “prophets,” kindled to frenzy by music, excite no surprise. But with the moral advance of prophecy, the old ecstatic element does not completely vanish. It is seen in Elijah when he runs before Ahab’s chariot across the plain of Jezreel; it is seen in Elisha when he refuses to deliver his message until a minstrel is brought. Stranger still, it is seen in Amos and Isaiah. In five visions (7:1-9; 8:1-3; 9:1) Amos sees ever more and more distinctly the doom advancing upon Israel; and in a time of intense political excitement, when Jerusalem was confused by rumors, Isaiah (8:11) felt himself on one occasion grasped, as it were, by a mighty Hand. Such experiences are less to be wondered at in Ezekiel. The visions in which he seemed to be transported from the land of his captivity to Jerusalem (8:3) and back again to Babylonia (11:24) are no doubt to be partly explained by his special psychic susceptibility; and in any case the relative prominence of these and similar phenomena in

Ezekiel is symptomatic of the decadence of prophecy. The visions of Zechariah, though they might be the result of prolonged contemplation, are probably little more than a literary device, though even as such, they are suggestive of the ominous change that is passing over prophecy. The point, however, is that prophecy, even upon its higher levels, does not invariably shake itself free from the ecstatic conditions in which it originated (cf. the very striking scene in Isaiah, chap. 21). It is perhaps no accident that the only pre-exilic prophet who has a *series* of visions to recount—Amos—is the one who stands nearest in time to the earlier and more distinctively ecstatic type of prophecy. Further, a certain pathological quality attaches to some of the symbolic acts even of the greatest of the prophets. To say nothing of Ezekiel's escape through a hole which he had dug in the wall of his house, to portray the desperate fate of the inhabitants of Jerusalem at its capture (12:1 ff.) there is the case of Isaiah walking barefoot through the streets of Jerusalem (chap. 20), and of Jeremiah carrying a yoke upon his neck (chap. 27). These acts were no doubt little more than devices to stimulate curiosity and give vivid expression to a neglected message. They are very far from proving that the prophets were ecstatics; they were deliberately done and afterward minutely interpreted. And yet, to a western judgment at any rate, they seem to be on the borderland of the pathological.

It would be a complete mistake, however, to seek in the ecstatic phenomena of prophecy for that which is distinctive of prophetic communion with God. For, in the first place, those phenomena are in any case only sporadic, and in some prophecies are not present, or at least not traceable at all. The striking thing about the Hebrew prophets, as about Paul, is not their ecstasy, but their sanity. If it is true that they are mastered by God, it is no less true that they are masters of themselves. If some of their visions come to them in trances or in dreams, others and indeed the great majority of them are seen through eyes that were very wide awake to the political situation, especially upon its moral side. In one remarkable passage Amos gives immortal expression to his conception of the world as an arena of law and order, cause and effect (3:1-8). In the rise of the Assyrians, he hears the awful voice of God, the growl of the terrible Lion which would in the not very distant future spring with a

roar upon Israel and tear her to pieces. The prophets are the great interpreters of history and of the individual life, and their interpretation is, in one aspect, the fruit of divinely illumined reflection and meditation. When Hosea begins his book by saying that Jehovah had told him to take a wife of whoredom and children of whoredom (1:2), it is obvious that he is here interpreting his marriage from the point of view of his maturer experience of his wife's infidelity. It is marvelous that in the impulse which led him to love the woman who brought a cloud of sorrow over his later life, he should have recognized the voice of God. This interpretation is half revelation, half reflection—Hosea could not have consciously distinguished between the two. His call to be a prophet came in no ecstatic way, but through the simple fact of his marriage to an unworthy woman, whose unworthiness was yet impotent to destroy his mighty love for her. Similarly we have no reason to believe that the call of Amos came in any unusual or ecstatic way. Considering his experience of visions—though even these appear to be little more than the natural result of long and painful reflection upon Israel's sin and probable doom—we cannot indeed absolutely say that his call may not have come through some ecstatic experience. But nothing in his account of it compels us to assume this. He simply tells us that as he was following his sheep, Jehovah "took" him (7:15). This may mean no more than that, brooding, as he must often have done, upon the deplorable situation in Israel, it suddenly flashed upon him that through him the divine word which was needed might and must be spoken.

The phrase, *Thus saith Jehovah*, which runs through prophecy from beginning to end, points no doubt originally to a communion of very special intimacy between the prophet and his God: it was almost as if words from the very lips of Jehovah of hosts fell upon the prophet's ears (Isa. 5:9; 22:14). But we make no special use of it in this discussion, for it seems in course of time to have acquired the more general meaning of the simple proclamation of the divine will.

It is plain, then, that ecstasy, though an occasional fact of prophecy, is by no means *the* fact, nor is it in such eccentric and exceptional experiences that we are to seek the prophetic communion with God. At the same time it has to be remembered that those very experiences could be, and occasionally were, to the prophets the medium of a

supreme manifestation of God, and that through those experiences a communion so vivid and commanding was realized that it affected their whole subsequent career. We refer in particular to the prophetic call. Doubtless the men who heard the call were in every case deep-hearted men who had long and earnestly thought upon the sins of their people, and of the needs of the times, especially their infinite need of God—men to whom the very need constituted a call. But to some prophets—not demonstrably to all—there came a supreme moment in which this call was articulately heard in a definite spiritual experience. This is true of Isaiah, of Jeremiah, and of Ezekiel. But Ezekiel's vision (chap. 1), though no doubt thoroughly real, is so interfused with elaborate and complicated elements which appear to be the result of reflection, that the sense of the immediate presence of God is somewhat impaired—it is at any rate more difficult for us sympathetically to apprehend. A difficulty of another kind confronts us in the story of Jeremiah (1:4-10). That great prophet has the wonderful and reassuring sense of having been predestined to his high office before he was born. But that this assurance came, and that his ministry began, in an ecstatic experience, seems altogether probable. The difficulty in asserting this dogmatically is that the account of his call, as we have it, appears to be fragmentary. He speaks of Jehovah putting forth *his hand* (1:9) and touching his mouth; and in this simple phrase we get a glimpse of an experience which, as Paul said of a similar experience, it was not possible for a man to utter. The fact that we are unable to explain the experience or to understand all that it involved, is no reason why it should be depleted, rationalized, or explained away. It is doubtless analogous to that other experience of the divine Hand (Isaiah 8:11) to which allusion has already been made. It comes not only to a Jeremiah whose heart throbs with emotion, and down whose face steal tears for the daughter of his people, but also to Isaiah of the strong and steady soul.

Indeed the ecstatic experience which in some cases constituted the prophet's call can be studied in its purest and simplest form in the call of Isaiah. Many of the elements which enter into his majestic vision can be traced to the prophet's own experience and environment. The thought of the mighty king of Judah, dead, might wake

in his mind the thought of that other King who sat upon his throne forevermore. The seraphim may have been suggested by the brazen serpent (II Kings 18:4), and their song by the music of the temple choir. But all this does not destroy the reality of the vision. The sense of his sinfulness—of an unworthiness which not only disqualified him for service, but deserved death—the humble and horror-struck cry, “Woe is me, for I am undone,” are most naturally explained by the prophet’s own words when he says, “Mine eyes have seen the King, Jehovah of hosts.” He may have come to the temple in a thoughtful and melancholy mood, with the burden of his country upon his heart, and fallen, through his meditation, into an ecstatic condition, in which he saw the glory which irradiated the world and the unseen Lord who kept him steadfast throughout his subsequent career.

Moments like these must have been of transcendent importance in the spiritual history of the prophets. But it must not be supposed that they were frequent; in all probability they were extremely rare. No doubt Isaiah, on another occasion, feels himself under the constraint of the Hand (8:11); but, in general, it is the glory of Hebrew prophecy, as represented by its great literary exponents, that ecstasy is relegated to the background. As we have seen, it is not altogether absent; it may even be at times of crucial importance; but so far from its being the normal medium of communion with God, it is not even frequent. It is extremely rare, and—this is significant—relatively frequent only in Ezekiel, the prophet who represents the beginning of the decadence of prophecy. The matter apparently stands thus. The sense of the divine presence and fellowship which came in the initial vision was so real and overwhelming that that presence and fellowship were forever after guaranteed. The prophet was thenceforth continually sure of God and joyful in him, even though the first ecstatic experience which brought the overwhelming conviction of him should never be repeated, just as a later poet can rejoice in God, even though the fig tree and the olive should fail; that is, though those gifts should be withdrawn in which God was wont to manifest his grace (Hab. 3:17). The vision might pass, but God remained forever.

Whether this satisfying sense of God and his fellowship would be

steadfastly held through a long and perplexing career, would of course depend partly upon the temperament of the prophet. In this connection, the contrast between Isaiah and Jeremiah is most instructive. Isaiah is a regal soul. Having seen the King once, he has seen him forever, and into his heart the vision has brought quietness, confidence, and serenity. Not so Jeremiah. More tender and emotional by nature, his sense of God (though not his faith in God) is more exposed to the gusts of circumstance. Opposition disquiets him, persecution perplexes him; there come times when he would fain stifle the divine word within him, and have done with it forever. But it is mightier than he, and it flashes forth, in spite of him, in words of fire (chap. 20). Jeremiah is to us the most interesting of the prophets because of the naive candor with which he discloses the conflict between the human and the divine in his own soul.

This fellowship with God gave the prophet an insight into the purposes of God, and into the divine meaning of historical events, especially of great historical crises. God does nothing, as Amos said (3:7), without first revealing his secret to his servants the prophets. But that did not mean that, in individual cases of perplexity, the divine will was instantly revealed; it could be revealed only to those who were prepared to possess their souls in patience. More than once we find Jeremiah reaching certainty only through a period of watching and waiting. When Hananiah, for example, promises complete deliverance from Babylon within two years, at first Jeremiah (chap. 28) does not know how to deal with the prophecy, and contents himself with pointing out that, according to the teaching of history, prophecies of peace are less likely to be fulfilled than prophecies of evil. But afterward the conviction that Hananiah was wrong grew upon him until it became a certainty. Then he appeared, denounced Hananiah's message as a lie, and prophesied his death within the year.

The prophetic writings are addresses to the people, and we are therefore, as has already been said, seldom permitted to see the prophets in direct address to God. Here again Jeremiah is the prophet of whom on this side we know most. Even if he did not tell us himself (20:12), we could be sure that he was accustomed to "roll his cause upon Jehovah." His recorded prayers give, no doubt, a totally

misleading impression of the man. Wrung from him as most of them were by the treachery and heartlessness of his people, they are largely prayers for the divine vengeance, expressed, too, in language of terrible realism. For us the interest of Jeremiah's prayers lies largely in the vehemence and familiarity with which he addresses God. He compares him to a deceitful brook and to waters that fail (15:18). He charges him with beguiling him into his prophetic mission, and thrusting him upon a career in which he had become a laughing-stock all the day (20:7). It is a pity that so few of the prophetic prayers have been recorded; but from what we do know, we may be quite sure that the ministries of the prophets were constantly sustained upon prayer.

It is very suggestive and significant that we so often find the prophets in the rôle of intercessors. They spoke to men so powerfully for God because they had first spoken earnestly to God for men. Nearly all the prayers ascribed to Moses are intercessory. He prays that the leprosy may be removed from Miriam, he prays that his apostate people may be forgiven. Practically all the intercessory prayers of the Old Testament are offered either by prophets or by men, like Abraham and Job, whom later ages idealized as prophets. Elijah prays for the restoration of the widow's son (I Kings 17:21), Amos twice prays that the blow may be averted from Israel (7:2, 5). A sense of the duty and power of prophetic prayer shines through the words of Jeremiah (15:1)—"Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my mind would not be toward this people" (cf. Ezek. 14:14, 16, 18, 20). Jeremiah appears to have habitually prayed for the people (11:14; 14:11), he claims to have "stood before thee to speak good for them, to turn away thy wrath from them" (18:20); and in times of peculiar perplexity, during and shortly after the siege of Jerusalem, king and people alike request his prayers (37:3; 42:2 f.).

In several directions, the effect of this communion with God is very marked even upon the outward life. In particular, it inspires the prophet with steadfastness and courage in moments of danger. He who feels that God is behind him and with him does not fear the face of man. It is this sense of the divine commission and presence that explains the fearless answer of the simple Tekoan shepherd to the warnings of the supercilious courtier-priest (Amos 7:14-17). It is

this that explains Isaiah's serenity when he goes forth to face Ahaz, whose heart shakes "as shake the forest trees before the wind" at the rumor of the coalition against Judah (Isa., chap. 7), and that enables him to make to Ahaz his magnificent offer of a sign from any part of the universe—from the heights above or the depths beneath (7:11). It is this that keeps him strong and steady when excitement and confusion reign in Jerusalem (8:12 f.; cf. 18:4). It is this that inspired the tender-hearted Jeremiah to face without flinching an angry crowd that was clamoring for his blood (Jer., chap. 26). "Jehovah of hosts—let him be your fear and let him be your dread" (Isa. 8:13)—that was the prophetic motto; and the fear of him drove out all fear of men or groups of men, political coalitions and foreign aggression, things present and things to come.

To the prophets this sense of God is not only an inspiration, it is a consolation amid all perplexity and sorrow. Jeremiah, for example, stands alone, without wife or child or any of the human joys that lift men over trouble or console them within it. But all the more real to him is God. God is all that he has, and he must be everything. He is his refuge in the day of evil (17:17), and his words are the joy and the rejoicing of his heart (15:16). His very defeat before men, as the late Professor A. B. Davidson remarks, "drove him into God's presence, as we may say, and gave him God. Feeling he had nothing else in the world—none else in the world—God became all to him. His life grew to be a fellowship with God; his thoughts seemed a dialogue between himself and God. If God seemed to deny him all other things, he gave him himself."